

ROBERTA WATSON

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
AFRO-AMERICANS IN SAN FRANCISCO  
PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II

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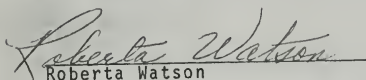
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Roberta Watson

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The Friends of the San Francisco Public Library, and  
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Project Coordinator: Lynn Bonfield

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INTERVIEW WITH ROBERTA SCOTT WATSON

JUNE 12, 1978

Home of Mrs. Watson, 210 Broderick Street, San Francisco.

Interviewer: Jesse J. Warr, III  
Transcriber: Linda Burnham

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BEGIN TAPE 1:3:1

JW: Let's start with your birth date.

RW: January, 1913. Twenty-eighth of January, 1913.

JW: And where was this?

RW: San Francisco.

JW: In which hospital.

RW: It's now called the Ralph K. Davies. At that time it was the German Hospital.

JW: Was it common for people to be born in the hospital at that time?

RW: Well, here it was, I imagine. My sister who is two years older than me, she was born there. She was the first Black baby born there.

JW: Oh, really.

RW: She was born there. And my mother told me and said that at the time, I believe it was one of the prize fighters -- I don't know, Jack Johnson or someone --

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RW: was also hospitalized there. And they took my sister out of the nursery and carried her around. She was a beautiful child, beautiful baby. I have a picture of her. I used to; I think she took it home. Mother said she [the child] was just showed off at the hospital, because she was the first Black baby ever born there. Then I came... [interruption]

JW: Were there any stories told about your birth that you remember? Any particular stories that were said about you as a child, a very young baby?

RW: No. It's interesting though, I think, how my mother and dad bought their first home. When they were expecting me, they were living in an apartment. My mother was a little unhappy and she said she wanted a home. So my dad said that then they would buy one. So they moved on Sanchez Street -- that's between 19th and 20th. And they bought a two-story home. The neighborhood was predominantly... well, it was all White.

Next door to us was a daughter and the next home was her parents. One of the daughters had to move when my mother and dad bought the house. My mother wasn't a very good cook; she didn't know how to sew. So Mrs. Hanson's two daughters taught my mother how to sew. They were married. They had children a little older than my sister at the time. They taught my mother how to sew. Mr. Hanson was really the instigation of my mother being an excellent cook, because he was a chef at sea. We were friends for a number of years, as long as we remained in the neighborhood. And they did of course get -- you know, there was a moving about and whatnot, for them more or less.

JW: What was your mother's maiden name?

RW: Virginia Thompson. They called her Virgie.

JW: Where was she born?

RW: She was born in La Belle, in Missouri.

JW: La Bellum?

RW: La Belle.

JW: Oh.

RW: La Belle, Missouri. But raised in Quincy, Illinois. She went there as a baby.

JW: What kind of family did she come from?





RW: My grandmother was born in slavery, and my grandfather too. I don't remember my grandfather. But I have recollections of my grandmother because we would go East to see her.

JW: Where was she living at that time?

RW: Quincy, Illinois.

JW: Did she ever tell you anything about slavery?

RW: No, she never did. She was born in slavery. In fact, my great grandmother was a field hand. And my grandmother, I guess, was about maybe twelve months old or so -- and they wrapped her up in a blanket and put her by the fireplace to keep her warm. They heard my grandmother scream. And they went in, and her head had been damaged, injured. But the people they worked for were good. And they called a doctor, and they put a silver dollar in my grandmother's head. My grandmother lived, I guess, to be about eighty-six or eighty-five years old. And she lived with that silver dollar, which is similar to what they would put -- a silver plate. Have you ever heard of that type of surgery with a head injury or skull injury?

JW: Right, yes.

RW: My grandmother lived with that all her life, those many years. So just think, from slavery. And my grandmother passed in 1937.

JW: Did your mother get an education?

RW: My mother went to partly high school. My mother was very unhappy in Quincy, Illinois. She didn't like that life.

JW: Why not?

RW: My grandmother was a very strict Methodist. My grandfather was strict Baptist. The people in the community, the Negro people or Black people -- whatever you say -- they were narrow and whatnot. My mother said when she was a little girl, she always said, "I'm going to get away from here. I'm going to get away from here." She was very unhappy. And I guess the first time she ran away... she ran away to an aunt in Iowa.

JW: As a girl, she went all the way to Iowa?

RW: Well, she was in the habit of going there to Iowa to her aunt. But she just left. When she saved enough money, she just went to her aunt. Of course my grandmother was unhappy and she [my mother] had to go back home. This was



RW: when she was in her early teens. And she said, "Well, I'm not going to stay. As soon as I get old enough, I'm going to leave again." So another aunt who was living in Park City, Colorado -- no, Utah... Park City, Utah -- she and my, what would be my granduncle, my granduncle and grand-aunt were living and working in Park City, Utah. And when they went home on a visit, they asked my mother would she like to go with them... come back. My mother said, "Definitely." My grandmother and grandfather knew she was unhappy, never liked it there. So they let her go.

JW: Was it partly a rebellion against her parents? Or just the place itself?

RW: I think it was rebellion against my grandmother really.

JW: The religious orthodoxy?

RW: Yes. And another thing she said... No matter what -- everything she done was wrong. I was a witness when she told my grandmother, when they had this confrontation a number of years late. I guess I was about fourteen or thirteen when I heard my grandmother and my mother have this long talk. And my mother saying the reason she didn't like it there. She told my grandmother, "You never believed me. No matter what the neighbors said, you always believed them. You wouldn't believe me."

JW: That's interesting.

RW: Is it? Well, you should have known my mother. She was wonderful.

JW: Well, tell me about her.

RW: My mother was a most understanding person. My friends would call up my mother and talk to her and tell her their problems. She never discussed it with me... Not too many years ago, one of my close friends, very dear friends, her daughter had to get married. Oh, she took it so hard. She took it very, very hard. And the sister of my friend -- the aunt of the girl that was in trouble -- she said to me, "How I wish your mother was living. Not my mother, Roberta, but your mother, so that your mother could talk to my sister and make her understand that the world hasn't come to an end." Now wasn't that a compliment?

JW: Yes.

RW: I couldn't ask for anything nicer for anyone to say of my mother -- for another girl to wish that my mother was living. She was very close to me.



JW: How did your mother get from Utah to California?

RW: She met my father in Salt Lake City because she left there [Park City]. She had another aunt who was married to a minister in Salt Lake City -- Washington was the name. And [he was] a cousin of my mother's... was quite prominent, famous. He was a singer, and he travelled in the vaudeville circuit.

JW: What was his name?

RW: George Dewey Washington. He was a minister... And my mother met my father in Salt Lake City, and I don't think they knew each other but a few weeks... three weeks... and they were married almost fifty years.

JW: Oh. They got married very quickly after they met.

RW: Yes.

JW: How did the family happen to be dispersed? It seems that you had relatives everywhere from Utah to Iowa to Illinois to Missouri.

RW: You know, I never asked. It's terrible, but I never asked. I never inquired. It wasn't discussed. Mother would speak of her aunt and about church service, you know, in Park City, and how she'd have to go to church and that sort of thing. That's why I never was made to go to church.

JW: Oh. I see. Did you go anyway?

RW: Oh, yes. My mother became a Catholic. She was a converted Catholic. But my father, my father was a Mason. And, oh, he was a doll! My mother was allowed to baptize my sister and me in the Catholic church. My sister was baptized at Sacred Heart on Fillmore Street, I was baptized at Mission Dolores. But my father said we could not make our First Communion until we decided ourselves what we wanted to do. So the result was that we went to Catholic church when we wanted to. But most of the time in the neighborhood... which was predominantly White, and because the children in the neighborhood went to a Congregational Sunday school, we went to the Congregational Sunday school -- just so we had some religious education. We went every single Sunday until, accidentally, on Mission Street, a young colored boy that lived about -- oh, maybe about ten blocks from us... and you probably have interviewed someone from them, the Fisher family?

JW: Yes, I've met Mrs. Fisher Gordon -- Elizabeth Fisher Gordon.



RW: It was her brother, her younger brother, that met Mother on Mission Street and said, "You're Mrs. Scott, aren't you?" And she said, "Yes". He said, "I was coming to see you to see what Sunday school your girls went to." (I guess I was about seven. I could have even been six... but seven, I guess, or seven and a half. That would make my sister about nine.) He asked her, "Couldn't we go to Bethel A.M.E. Sunday School?" And my mother said, "Yes." She was delighted, because there we would get to know some colored children. So he said he would come on a Sunday to get us. But when he came, my mother was dressed and ready to go with us. Because Bethel Church then was over on Powell Street, I guess, and Jackson... yes, Powell and Jackson. -- Now the Cathay Mortuary is there. And my mother went along too.

JW: She went along that day, or did she continue to go along?

RW: She continued to go because she was very... well, she was a little particular about us going across that distance. And then my father always wanted her to take us wherever we were going.

JW: What was your father doing in Salt Lake City when your mother met him?

RW: My father worked for a company that stocked bars.

JW: In Salt Lake? Among all those Mormons?

RW: No, no, no. He worked for a company and it was Denver based. Now my father's from Ohio.

JW: Is that where he was born?

RW: Yes. He was born in Elyria, Ohio.

JW: Do you know when that was? Approximately.

RW: Well, now, let's figure it out... He died at eighty-three, at the age of eighty-three in 1955.

JW: 1872 or so.

RW: Okay. And my mother was born in '82. Ten years younger.

JW: And what was his family background in Ohio? Were they free-born?

RW: My grandfather was an Abyssinian. I do not know how he bought his freedom, but he was given his freedom.

JW: In the South, and then came to Ohio?





RW: I don't know.

JW: By "Abyssinian", you mean born in Ethiopia?

RW: Yes. He was. If you'd see my sister, you could see it [the characteristic Abyssinian features] more than with me.

JW: How did he get to this continent?

RW: I don't know. I guess he was captured or something.

JW: So he had been a slave. He didn't come of his own free will.

RW: Yes, yes. Oh I imagine so. But he was free. And my grandmother died at the age of twenty-four. And so I know nothing about her— my paternal grandmother.

JW: What was your paternal grandfather's name?

RW: Alexander Scott.

JW: He didn't have an Ethiopian name?

RW: No. This was the name, Alexander Scott. This is what they told me. Now, you know, I don't know. This what my mother and dad said. I'll show you a picture a little later.

JW: So your father was born in Ohio not long after the Emancipation. What was the family doing in Ohio? Were they farmers?

RW: Yes. My grandfather had a farm.

JW: They owned it?

RW: Yes. I saw it in 1931, the first year that I went to Ohio. My dad showed me the barn that they built.

JW: How did he happen to come this far west?

RW: My father came West with my grandfather when he was fifteen years old and Market Street wasn't even paved. And then they went back to Ohio, and my father went back to school, I guess. My dad never finished -- only the eighth grade... he only finished the eighth grade in school.

JW: Why did he come originally on that little trip?



- RW: After my step-grandmother passed away... my father was twelve years old when she passed, I believe he said -- I can remember that. And he said she was a real goodstep-mother. My Grandfather was broken up, and they decided to come West. My grandfather wanted to go places. On my father's family, my dad had eight cousins in Ohio. And they all looked just like my dad -- It was uncanny when I went there the first year. And they were all very prominent in Oberlin, Ohio.
- JW: Where the college is.
- RW: Yes. Where the college is.
- JW: Did they have any connection with the college as you know?
- RW: Well, one of my dad's cousins was a Congregational minister in Oberlin.
- JW: Do you happen to know the name?
- RW: Reverend Shaw. Reverend Shaw. ...Doretha Collins. Have you met Dr. Daniel Collins?
- JW: Not yet.
- RW: Well, Doretha would be my dad's third cousin. Her grandmother was my dad's first cousin and she lived in Oberlin, Ohio.
- JW: So your father came out the first time with his father. And then the second time they came...
- RW: The second time they were in Denver. They went to Denver, and then from there my father started working.
- JW: For this company?
- RW: Yes. I guess for this company. That's all I know about it, you see. They stocked bars. But, you know, my dad mostly worked in Nevada. That was during the gold rush. When in Goldfield, Nevada and Tonopah, Nevada, they had quite a gold rush -- and silver mines were working there. My dad would go there and stock up all these casinos and order all the liquor and do all like that. That was what he was doing.
- JW: Was this considered an unusual job for a Black man to have? Or did people not respond to him racially?
- RW: I don't know whether they knew he was Black or not, to tell you the truth.
- JW: Oh. He was fair.



RW: Extremely.

JW: Did he consciously or unconsciously "pass"?

RW: He said he wasn't "colored." "No one ever 'colored' him" [he would say]. He was born that way.

JW: I see. Was your mother fair as well?

RW: No. My mother was brown-skin, my color.

JW: So they met in Utah... were married in three weeks.

RW: About three weeks. It [the marriage] lasted. (Laughs.)

JW: Obviously a love match. And then what happened?

RW: My father first came to San Francisco for employment. And then my mother came. They were married I guess about five years before my sister was born.

JW: Where did they first move when they were first here?

RW: I think they lived out on the Avenues. They roomed with a lady. I met her. In fact, it was quite a coincidence how I met her. When I married, I rented an apartment. There were only two units in that building. And the lady was the lady that my mother had roomed with when she first came to San Francisco. I can't think of her last name, I just know the first name.

JW: What was that?

RW: Anna. They lived there. And then later on Hayes Street. It was, I think, the Alamo Apartments. My mother and dad got an apartment there, and for a little janitorial work they were given their apartment [rent free]. My father started working in 1911 for Islam Temple, the Shriners.

JW: Doing what?

RW: As a club attendant.

JW: What is that?

RW: A clubroom attendant? Well, he did bartending, and I guess a little clean-up work and things like that. That was a good job -- excellent job.

JW: Did he ever say to you that he might have considered "passing" to get a better



JW: job?

RW: Never. Never.

JW: Did he have other family, or did your mother have other family come out here to California?

RW: My aunt, my father's sister, came and settled in Oakland.

JW: And her name was what?

RW: Her name was Ella Leamond. I have a first cousin across the Bay named Geraldine Field. And then my second cousin, who is her son, is Frank Fields who is a podiatrist there.

JW: She settled over there married, or how did she happen to come out? Do you know?

RW: She was married first and was living in Washington, D.C... And she came out with my cousin. I think her husband died. She married this man named Mr. Leamond. He was a seaman and he died at sea.

JW: Did your parents talk anything about... well, how do I want to put this?... What did they think of San Francisco when they first got here? What made them decide to stay?

RW: They never talked too much about it. They loved San Francisco. They thought it was beautiful. My dad always spoke of the beauty of San Francisco. He enjoyed it. He was an outdoors man. And my mother too. They loved it.

JW: You mean he went on hiking trips or nature walks?

RW: My father had a motorcycle. (Laughter.) You haven't heard anything yet! He had a motorcycle -- he put a side car on it and they had a seat on the back. I will show you a picture. My mother rode in back and my sister and I in the side car. We travelled up and down California. We were noted! (Laughter.)

JW: What did they call you? The Scott Gang?

RW: The Scott Family. We were a happy family. Anyone said, if they were blue or down in the dumps, [that] all you had to do was go over to the Scotts, because there was always something going on. Our home was a happy home. My father would call my mother up in the afternoon and say, "Pack up dinner and I'll be home and we'll get going." And my mother would put our food in





RW: jars and we had our camping equipment and that sort of thing and we'd drive down to Spring Valley Lakes where they had a picnic ground. The beach was different then. We had a little pup tent, my dad did. He'd put up the pup tent, he'd build a fire, and they would heat dinner. Sometimes he would make two or three trips to pick up some other friends. He would go and get the children and bring the children first. Then he would go and get Mr. and Mrs. Fontaine and bring them out to the beach. And we'd have a family picnic. But in summertime we were never home in the evening. We were always gone on that motorcycle.

JW: Did many other people have motorcycles?

RW: No. No families like ours. No, no. (Laughs.) My father was a little on the unorthodox side. He'd have made a wonderful hippie. Oh, I wish he'd have lived! Oh I wish he were here when the flower children were here! He would have enjoyed every bit of it.

JW: Did they ever talk about any negative experiences they may have had with racism -- encountering negative feelings or prejudices?

RW: When my mother first moved in the neighborhood where they first bought their home, it was a little chilly. It was a little chilly. The little boy that lived next door asked her -- the street work wasn't in -- and he asked her, "Why did she have to walk two blocks? Why didn't she cut through a certain area and it would shorten her way to go to Market Street?" And she said, she didn't know that she could use it. He said, "Well, everyone does, and it will save you." It was through this youngster that my mother became friendly with the neighbors. And became firm friends, firm friends.

JW: What about on his job or in any other incidences?

RW: Oh, in later years. In later years when I was older there was a little trouble. Because, especially in the Thirties, when times were real hard, it was considered an excellent job, and he had problems. White men wanted his job. In fact they hired a White man.

JW: And fired your father?

RW: No. My father would quit though. Every so often he'd quit. He would quit and he would go to work for another man, a private man.

JW: Did your mother have to work as well?

RW: My mother went to work because my dad was away in China with the Shriners. He would travel with them. They would take him everywhere.



JW: To China? When did he go to China?

RW: 19... In the 1920's.

JW: What did he tell you about China?

RW: Oh, he loved it. He loved it. And in Japan he was treated better than the White people in those days. He loved it. He brought us back beautiful things.

JW: Did he speak any Oriental languages?

RW: No. When he would get unhappy with his job with the Shriners, he would quit. A couple of times he would work on the ships, and he would take his motorcycle back and forth. He was allowed to take it -- the single part of it, not the side car. He would take it back. And then the Shriners would talk him back into it, give him a little raise, and he'd go back to work. When they would go on their conventions -- like you've heard when the Shriners go to places -- my father would sign up with a railroad company, and draw a salary with the railroad and get his salary from Islam Temple.

JW: Did you ever feel any financial strain coming up?

RW: None.

JW: Did they discuss money problems very often?

RW: No. Only once in my life I knew anything about financial strain -- when he was very, very ill. And it was a matter of mortgaging our home. Otherwise, during the 1929 Depression I didn't know a thing about it: We went East to see my grandmother.

JW: Did you stay there for a long time?

RW: We'd stay through the summer when school was out.

JW: How did you travel back and forth? By train?

RW: The first time I went back was in 1930. The first time my father was able to save enough money to send my mother and my sister and me. There was only the two girls and my parents. He was able to send us back to Quincy, Illinois, on the train. So when we came home, we told him about Grandma and how we liked it and everything. And he said, "Well, next year maybe we'll drive." And that meant not paved roads all the way. But we drove.

JW: Was it an exciting trip?



RW: Oh, it was wonderful! We went all the way to New York.

JW: What was New York like in those days?

RW: In 1931? Well, I think we stayed in Harlem. My sister had married when she was very young, and so we stayed with her mother-in-law.

JW: And what did you think of Harlem?

RW: Well, when we drove up to get to the building where we were, the first thing we saw were some little children playing where the hydrant was, and the hydrant [was] on -- it was hot, it was in summertime, -- without a stitch of clothes on. That was a revelation. [Laughs.] That was a revelation. New York... I insisted one night on seeing Times Square at midnight. So my dad drove downtown in New York. We got down there, the policeman saw our license... the car had a running board. He got on the running board and he talked to my father, and showed me everything there was to see. And all the shows and what was there and whatnot about Times Square. And, of course, we went to the Bronx Zoo. And we took a river boat -- we took a trip up the Harlem River, I believe it was, the Hudson River.

JW: What kind of car was that your father had?

RW: We had a Willis Knight.

JW: Was that a fancy car? I'm not familiar with that.

RW: It was a sleeve-valve motor, which was unusual... a sleeve-valve motor.

JW: And it held up through all those bumpy roads from California to New York?

RW: Oh, it was excellent, excellent. But then we went again in '33. And when we went in '33... The car was made in Toledo, Ohio. And we went to Toledo, and my dad bought a new one and drove it back home.

JW: Had you read anything about Harlem before you went there?

END TAPE 1:3:1

BEGIN TAPE 1:3:2

RW: ... about the tenements and everything like that. But Mrs. Flout had a very nice apartment, a very nice apartment. I couldn't tell you what street it was on. I would have to, gee, delve way back and try to go in... I'm sure the address books have long since disappeared. But it was in the hundred-something



RW: address, I remember that. And it was very nice.

JW: So your sister was living in New York at the time?

RW: No, my sister was here. My sister was here. We stayed... Her mother-in-law lived in New York.

JW: Oh, I see.

RW: Her mother-in-law, her husband's mother, lived there.

JW: What was your sister's name, by the way?

RW: My sister 's name was Luella Marant at that time.

JW:q How do you spell that last name?

RW: M-A-R-A-N-T.

JW: And I assume her husband was a native New Yorker?

RW: No, he was from New Orleans.

JW: Oh. Was he Creole?

RW: Yes.

JW: And where did she meet him?

RW: In Oakland.

JW: Oh, that's right... I just want to go back for a minute to China. Is there anything specifically that your father talked about, about the Chinese? The Japanese?

RW: He talked about their customs and their ways and whatnot. He was very interested in them. But, of course, he didn't get in touch with too much of the common people because he was working. The moment he'd go in he'd set up bars and whatnot. And whenever the people wanted something he was there to serve them.

JW: What kind of contact did you have with the American Chinese and Japanese as you were coming up?

RW: When I came up I didn't come in contact with many Orientals at all. Maybe in a store or something like that. It wasn't until my family moved from the





RW: home on Sanchez Street and we moved on Geary Street... I guess we moved there in 1937, a large home.

JW: And what community was there -- Japanese?

RW: Yes, it was Japanese. It was right there at Laguna and Geary. The Salvation Army building was on the corner. And when they [the City] redeveloped my father sold to them. It's no longer the Salvation Army, it's the Christ Bearers... not the Christ Bearers, -- "I Have Found It" -- that religious group. They're there now. The Salvation Army was there on the corner... and next to us were Japanese neighbors. And Japanese were downstairs. There was a unit downstairs in our home.

JW: What were your relationships with them like?

RW: Excellent. It was a young girl, recently married. We were very good friends. In fact when the Japanese were sent to concentration camps, she was expecting. And I bought everything for her first child.

JW: Do you remember her name?

RW: Yes. Sumi Koneko.

JW: What about relationships with the Chinese community? I'm trying to understand the relationships between various non-White groups.

RW: I had none whatsoever with the Chinese. The closest I've ever been to Chinese is working with them. I worked for thirty years for the [Federal] government at Naval Air Station, Alameda. Several of the employees that I came into contact with and became friendly with were Chinese.

JW: Were they more or less restricted to Chinatown in those days?

RW: I guess, when I think of it, maybe so. They didn't live beyond the confines too much. In the neighborhood where I grew up there were no Chinese.

JW: Would you see Chinese on Market Street or something like that?

RW: I don't even recall it. I didn't pay that much attention. I wasn't aware. Now there was a big Chinese restaurant right there at Fifth and Market Street, and we used to go there when I was a little girl...

JW: You like Chinese food?



RW: Yes I do. Do you?

JW: Love it... Okay. Your sister and you are two years apart?

RW: Twenty-two months.

JW: Would you consider your relationship close?

RW: Extremely, extremely. Yes.

JW: Your parents I guess treated you as equals?

RW: Oh yes. Oh yes. Everyone always said Luella could get anything out of Daddy and I could get anything out of Mother. Luella always said Mother loved me best and I said, "Well, Daddy loves you best." But there was a great deal of love between the four of us.

JW: What did your sister do once she became an adult? What kind of job did she hold?

RW: She sewed.

JW: For...

RW: A French modiste first. A French modiste. Very, very exclusive. Then she worked out in the Avenues at a cleaning and pressing shop and did all the alterations -- quick sewing.

JW: Apparently your family was not exclusive. You had a lot of friends around. Did they come over to the house a lot when you were a child?

RW: Yes. We always brought our friends home -- always.

JW: Did your parents have any preferences among your friends? Did they tell you not to associate with certain people or anything like that?

RW: There was no one here that we couldn't associate with in those days. You didn't meet anybody that you weren't supposed to meet. You just didn't.

JW: What kinds of chores did you have to do when you were coming up?

RW: When I came up.. oh I had to do a little dusting. When I think of it now it was a fight: My mother and dad, we had a coal stove. It was a wood box, I don't think it was any larger than that [end table]. It was my job to put coal in that box. Then my dad carried it in the house. But it was fight for



RW: me to fill that coal box, when I think of it now.

JW: Anything else?

RW: No. Just had to keep our room tidy. My sister and I shared the same room.

JW: What kind of games did you play?

RW: When we were young? Oh, in the neighborhood... I had all kinds of friends in the neighborhood. As a very small child? Well, I played dolls a long time. I played with dolls until I was twelve or thirteen years old. My sister grew up fast. I didn't. We played baseball with the boys.

Where we lived you had to walk up stairs -- it's more or less like a terrace -- to get to where we lived on one side, because Sanchez Street doesn't come through. And the other side on 20th Street was a steep hill. The first car we had was a Ford. And for my father to come up that hill, sometimes he had to zig-zag, you know, zig-zag across so the car could come up the hill. The reason why we got a car and he sold his motorcycle was because my sister insisted on learning how to drive the motorcycle.

JW: So he sold it?

RW: So he sold it and they bought a Ford.

JW: He was afraid that she would hurt herself?

RW: Definitely, definitely. My sister always could drive [from the time] when she was sixteen years old. I can't drive. But we played baseball with all the children in the neighborhood. We played dolls. And we sold perfume to the neighbors, you know, out of crushed flowers, and that sort of thing.

JW: You made it yourself?

RW: Oh yes. The neighbors knew they weren't getting anything but water and flowers. But we would do that. And we played games. "Queen's Chair", I don't know if you know what that is.

JW: No, I don't.

RW: Oh, that was fun! You put an old blanket or old coat or whatever we could find in a dark corner in the basement, or something like that. And maybe we would -- we weren't allowed to use water or something like that. But we'd put a bucket or any old thing underneath it. And when you'd go to sit down, then



RW: you'd fall down and you don't know what it was. We would do all kinds of crazy things like that. And play hide and seek, tag. Just usual kids' games.

JW: Did you go to the beach?

RW: Oh yes. All the time with my parents. All the time. And when I was in high school, in the evening time -- my mother and dad liked to go in the evening time after dinner -- we would ride out to the beach and just sit there, just sit there.

JW: Did you go to Golden Gate Park?

RW: All the time. My mother would take us there all the time, take our lunch.

JW: For the museums or just...

RW: We'd go to the museums and we'd go to the children's playground. We had a love of the theater very young. My mother loved the stage, and so as youngsters we would go to the Orpheum. My father, you see -- who worked for the Shriners -- my father knew everyone that was anyone in town: We were always given tickets for the Orpheum Theater; My father never paid full price for a car; we had meat; we had boxes of cookies sent to us, cases of ginger ale sent to us, all like that. Christmas time, toys, toys, toys. They gave to the poor children, they had a big party, so toys came to our house.

JW: Did your father have a nickname?

RW: Yes. Everybody called him Opie. O-P-I-E.

JW: How did he get that name?

RW: My sister as a little girl was read the funny papers by one of mother's friends. My father's name was Harvey, and Mother called him Harvey, of course. My mother said there was somebody in the funny paper named Opie and my sister called my dad Opie. When my father passed away the Sun Reporter had "Opie Scott Dies." But everybody called him "Opie".

JW: When did you develop your interest in reading?

RW: Oh, very young. Oh I can't remember not reading.

JW: What kinds of things did you read?

RW: Well, of course, children's books at first. And I've always liked autobiographies and travel, because my mother and father liked to go. .





JW: Who were your favorite writers?

RW: As a child?

JW: Well, as a teenager for instance.

RW: Oh, I can't remember. I can't even remember. I'm sixty-five.

JW: Your memory has been working very well so far.

RW: Well, memories are very dear to me and they're cherished. This is how I keep them alive with me. I think of all the happy things.

JW: Did your parents ever punish you corporally, physically?

RW: Accidentally I got slapped once when my mother lost her temper. But my father said there would be no spanking -- there would be talking.

JW: Was this unusual among children in the neighborhood?

RW: Yes. Children were spanked. But we weren't.

JW: Did you consider yourself spoiled?

RW: Everybody said that I'm spoiled. My sister says I'm spoiled. But I don't think so. I think I'm a nice person. (Laughs.) But they say that we were a little spoiled, I think. But we always were very, very... we had very nice manners... Extremely good manners.

JW: How did your family celebrate Christmas?

RW: Oh it was very beautiful. But my father always worked on Christmas Day. Most of the time we didn't have a big Christmas dinner on Christmas because there was so much food left over. They had a buffet for the members of Islam Temple. And it was turkeys, turkeys, turkeys. Gallons of shrimp salad. Gallons of food. So we shared in that. Our friends shared in that when my dad brought it home. So our Christmas dinner was either the Sunday before or the Sunday afterwards. But we had happy Christmases.

JW: Did you celebrate birthdays?

RW: Oh yes. Our birthdays were always very special when we were little because... Most of our neighbors... This one family, they were Danish and you gave a cup and a saucer for a gift or you gave a very pretty little pin. I still have a cup and saucer that's left that... when I was a child it was given to me. You gave little gifts like that. Of course, in those days they weren't too expensive,



RW: but they were expensive for our parents. Those were the kinds of gifts that you would receive.

JW: Were there any kind of city-wide celebrations that you remember?

RW: Maybe this will interest you: My mother always spoke very well. She was, my father said, the best actress in the world. She was very dramatic. We'd say, "There goes Mommy and her dramatics again." So I always could recite very well. My sister, she would recite too, but you couldn't get her to do it. But when we were young, one of the earliest things I can remember was the end of the [First] World War... or maybe it wasn't the end of the World War. How we were chosen, how we were selected I don't know. But at the YMCA they entertained some colored soldiers, and we spoke. We recited. I barely can... it's fuzzy. I imagine if my mother hadn't kept it refreshed in my memory, I wouldn't remember it.

JW: You mentioned that she was very interested in theater and was a good elocutionist. Did she ever perform publicly?

RW: No, no, no. Never. No. But she liked it. And she loved the theater.

JW: Did she have aspirations ever as a younger woman to be...?

RW: Maybe she did. Maybe she did. I wouldn't be surprised. But she loved it. I know way before she came here, they always went to minstrel shows she said, whenever they came to town, and that sort of thing.

JW: Did you have a nickname as a child?

RW: Yes, and they still call me that. Most people don't know my first name. They call me "Sister".

JW: And your sister's nickname was what?

RW: Lu.

JW: How were your parents different?

RW: My mother was social and my father wasn't too social. He enjoyed his friends in his own home. My mother belonged to social clubs. If they would have a gathering, my father would always show up just shortly before it was time to come home to collect his family. He would go for a while and socialize, but he was perfectly happy with his family at home.

JW: To which of your parents do you think you were closer?



RW: Well, I guess I was close to both of them. Until my father died we went to the movies every Friday night. I would leave my husband and go to the movies with my father on Friday night. And then we'd go out and have a sandwich. Mostly the sandwich would be across the Bay to a club called Slim Jenkin's. He'd have a gin fizz and a club sandwich, and I would have a club sandwich. (Laughs.)

But my mother, of course, I guess I was very close to my mother, because when they bought this home, this building here, Mother and Daddy lived in this apartment, and my husband and I lived in the front apartment. When my father took ill and went to the hospital, we moved in my dad's room. Two years we stayed over here. Our apartment we just used to put our clothes and [for] social affairs. Then we said, "Well, Mother you might as well be getting the rent," and my husband and I moved in here with her. Then when my mother became an invalid, of course I took care of her. We had a lady come in and take care of her. But we kept her home... no nursing home.

JW: Who were your heroines and heroes as a child?

RW: I didn't have any heroines or heroes. I never even thought of it. I didn't.

JW: People in your books?

RW: I used to go to the movies a great deal as a child. But my world was White. My world was White. I didn't think of color. The only time I thought of color was when I got hurt or someone made a remark or something. I didn't know that I was colored.

JW: When do you think you first realized it... that it was something that was going to be significant in your life?

RW: The first time when I realized it was when I went to grade school. The first to sixth grade, I went to Edison School. I guess I was the only Black child there after my sister went to the seventh grade. All through those early years my closest friend was a little White girl. We were inseparable.

JW: What was her name?

RW: Thelma Carrie. Her mother was dead and they had a housekeeper. She had three brothers, I think, and a father that lived there. We had planned on going to Everett School. That's where my sister went. You see, that would be for the seventh and eighth grade. So one evening or one afternoon my mother told me, she spoke to me and said, "Sister, I want to tell you something." She said, "You are not to see Thelma as much. You are to..." she didn't say "cool it", they didn't use that expression then. She said, "Thelma is not



RW: going to the same school that you are." I said, "She's not?" "No." "You're too close. Her family does not like the association." Of course, my mother had gotten this through neighbors, because my mother had neighbors all up and down the street. We lived on Sanchez Street close to 19th. Thelma lived on 20th Street. One of mother's closest friends, the Griken family, she lived across the street. And, of course, they were Irish and they were White, and then knew what was happening. I think it was Mrs. Griken that told my mother. So I felt terribly sorry about it and unhappy. My mother told me [to] let Thelma come to me instead of me going to Thelma. And so Thelma told me one day, "My brothers tell me that I have to go to Horace Mann." I said, "Oh, really?" And so she said, "Yes." I said, "Well, I'm going to Everett where my sister is." After the sixth grade we didn't see each other. A couple of times we've seen each other on Market Street and we have spoken. She's an extremely attractive woman.

JW: And that was that?

RW: That was that. That was the end of that. Then there was another little Spanish girlfriend in the neighborhood. We were friendly. And then when I had a boyfriend, we had boyfriend trouble.

JW: How was that?

RW: She liked my boyfriend.

JW: Was your boyfriend Black or White?

RW: He was Black.

JW: Why was that a problem?

RW: She liked him and her family invited him to her house. (Laughs.) He went a few times.

JW: And they broke it off?

RW: No. I think he broke it off. He was welcome there.

JW: What did you imagine you were going to be when you grew up?

RW: All I was told was that I wasn't going to work in anyone's kitchen. I could do anything I wanted to. I wasn't pressed to go to college. Anything I wanted to do I could do. Now my sister sewed. She went to about the second year of high school and married when she was sixteen. She insisted on getting married at sixteen. She told my mother and dad if they didn't let her get





RW: married, she'd run away and get married. And they knew that she would do it. So they gave her a small wedding and she got married.

JW: Who did she marry?

RW: She married Chester Marant.

JW: Right.

RW: It lasted a few years. It was too young. She was young; he wasn't that young. And he loved her till he died. She had a very hard time getting the divorce because her religion was Catholic and he was Catholic. And the judge was Catholic. And this is a Catholic Town. Or was, I should say, at one time. All your police and the judiciary were all Catholic. So her divorce came very hard after many a year... I went to a private high school.

JW: Which one?

RW: Lux High School. You've heard of Lick Wilmerding School?

JW: No, I haven't.

RW: Well, Lux High School was a girls' school. The boys' school was Lick Wilmerding, and they were mechanical arts more or less. It's still a tuition school. I went to Lux. I was made aware I was Black there too.

JW: How?

RW: My sister was there, you see, ahead of me. She went to the "Y" to [go] swimming. Nothing was said: she's fair. But when I went -- you see it was our gym class -- when I went... the second time I went, the gym teacher called me out of the classroom and told me I wasn't allowed to go swimming... the Black children didn't go. I said my sister has been swimming. She says, "They don't know what Luella is." So, instead of being late coming home, I went home from school. Mother asked what I was doing home so early. I cried and told her I couldn't go swimming. So she called my father at work. My father came home; he called up the director of the school. He said, "What is this?" He [the director] said, "Mr. Scott, if your daughter doesn't go swimming, there will be no swimming classes." So I was allowed to go swimming.

JW: Other than this incident with Thelma Carrie, do you remember any other time that your parents ever took you aside and explained the racial "facts of life" to you?

RW: When we went to a Black Sunday school, my mother told us it was time for us to know children of our own race. We needed to know Black children. This



RW: is where I met my friends that I have today.

JW: But at no time did they sort of lay out their racial philosophy to you?

RW: Never! Never! Never! It never was discussed. No. My father would say, "I'm not 'colored'." He was hurt dreadfully when he took us into Ohio. He didn't realize that he couldn't be served in Ohio with a Black wife and a Black daughter. He and my sister might have got by. But Daddy said when he travelled South with the Shriners, it would always be a Black porter that would turn him in and say, "That is a Black man that is with the Shriners. He is not White." A Black man always could tell another Black man, you know.

JW: Why would they [the porters] say that?

RW: Well, I don't know why they'd say it. I guess they wanted them to know it. Daddy was staying in the "White" Pullman car and enjoying all the fine things of life. This was before, you know, -- it was segregated then.

JW: You said your parents said they didn't ever want you to work in the kitchen.

RW: I wound up... I worked in one.

JW: You did?

RW: And I wouldn't give a million dollars for it.

JW: When was that?

RW: Well, my dad took ill in 19..., I guess, '35. He became very, very ill.

JW: From what, do you know?

RW: Yes. He had a prostate operation and it was so bad that his bladder was -- it was life and go for eight weeks. And family finances went down. My sister was the only one working. And so the only thing I could do was go in someone's kitchen. So I had a friend, and he was working out in Forest Hill [San Francisco] and I wanted a job. So I went out there and babysat. This man cooked for three days a week, and I heated up for three days a week.

JW: Why was that a valuable experience?

RW: Well, after that I took another job and I learned how to serve. I knew how to cook. I know everything that there is fine to do. Then from there I got another job. And then I went to work for one of the wealthiest women in the United



RW: States here in San Francisco. Her husband had died and she had dismissed all her servants and gone to Honolulu. When she came back, she needed someone. I had put an ad in the paper [with] a friend of mine. We put an ad in the paper for some work. I never wanted to work all day. I didn't have to.

JW: What was her name, the wealthy woman?

RW: Mrs. Ambrose Diche. Her daughter was married to one of the Heinz [canned soup manufacturers] of 57 Varieties. It's her son that's now a Senator, I think, or something... her grandson.

JW: But aside from that, what were your own projections of your future? What did you think...?

RW: I never gave it a thought. Mom and Daddy always had plenty money... Wasn't that silly? Wasn't that [being that care-free] silly! I didn't have to work. -- If I wanted something new, all I had to do was say it. I never had to worry.

JW: Did you have pets as a child?

RW: Oh yes. We always had cats. And one time we had some chickens and we had a fighting rooster. I mean we didn't let him fight. He just wouldn't let us in the yard. He didn't like me at all. If I'd go out to feed him, he'd jump on me. We had chickens. Everyone in the neighborhood did, in that area.

JW: For food or for eggs or for both?

RW: For eggs. You couldn't eat your [own] chickens. Some of the people in the neighborhood, they sold chickens to the others. My mother said I was three or four years old before I had an egg out of a store. All my eggs were from the neighbors. As a baby -- I have to tell you this: when I was born, and Mother knew the neighbors and everything, there was a neighbor named Mrs. Gilson, and she'd say, "Hand me Sister for a while." And my mother would hand me over the fence. And it would be maybe afternoon before she would have to call and say, "Where's my baby?" Maybe I'd be a half a block or a block away because the different neighbors would have me. My sister didn't permit that.

JW: She didn't permit what?

RW: Anybody to take her. (Laughs.) No, no, no.

JW: What was most likely to make you angry when you were a child?

RW: Oh, I had a tender [terrible] temper they said. Temper... if things didn't go my way, that I couldn't play jacks very well. So my sister would tell the kids, "Okay, Sister



RW: doesn't play jacks good, so we'll give her two games." ... Nice child (Chuckle).

JW: Did you like school?

RW: Yes. I was a good student.

JW: What were your favorite subjects?

RW: History.

JW: Really?

RW: History and geography.

JW: Do you remember your teachers from your...

RW: Yes, I remember some teachers very well.

JW: Which ones stand out in your mind?

RW: Well, we had a teacher in high school. -- Her name was Miss Gardner. She was an Easterner, and I liked her. I think I liked her because she was interesting, and she'd talk about the East, she'd talk about different sections of the country. And, you see, by Dad having travelled quite a bit and going to different places and bringing home pictures, it would give me an insight of different parts of the country. Miss Gardner would talk about... I think she was my history teacher, if I had history in high school. I liked her... and, let me see, another teacher who I could remember.

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JW: Were you the teacher's pet?

RW: I couldn't say that I was. I think in some instances I was.

JW: What kinds of students got along real well with teachers?

RW: When I was in school?

JW: Yes.





RW: The good students -- students that were, you know, no disciplinary problem.

JW: Are there any movies, plays or books from your teenage years that really stuck with you or really influenced you?

RW: I don't know. I think my favorites, when I look back now, were the Five Little Peppers, a family story. Their last name was Pepper. And... What was that other story?... Raggedy Ann. Oh, that I carried around with me for years, the story book of Raggedy Ann. And if anyone soiled it, I would go into a tantrum.

JW: Who were your friends in high school? Were they becoming Blacker?

RW: I was the only Black one in my class. So I lived at school and had friends there while I was in school, and then on Saturday and Sunday I had my Black friends.

JW: From Bethel primarily or where?

RW: Well, they were friends of people that my mother had become acquainted with over the years.

JW: Are you still in touch with most of your friends?

RW: Oh yes, oh yes. The friends that I knew then, I'm friends with now. And I've increased my friends.

JW: Both Black and White?

RW: Yes. I was one of the first members of Fellowship Church, and I have friends from there. One friend in particular who lives in Washington, D.C. now. We're very, very good friends.

JW: What kinds of things did you do in your leisure hours in high school?

RW: In my leisure hours? Oh, I was busy, I was busy. What did I do? I was always doing something.

JW: Were you in the Scouts?

RW: No. I went to the Community Center as a child.

JW: Where was that?

RW: The Booker T. Washington Community Center. I would have to travel to that -- you know, go by streetcar. We put on plays. And those were my friends. We



RW: had a dancing class.

JW: What kind of dancing -- ballroom?

RW: No, no. The other kind. Sort of ballet. They don't teach children that so much any more.

JW: "Interpretive dance"?

RW: Well, they don't call it interpretive dance. Dancing class it was. If you were able to stand on your toes, you stood on your toes, -- which is "ballet" now, but then it was just "dancing". Went to dancing class there. And I belonged to a drama club. And we had a lot of fun.

JW: What types of plays did you put on?

RW: Children's plays: "Rumplestiltskin" and "Alice in Wonderland". That sort of thing.

JW: Did you see any Black productions -- "Run, Little Children", or any of those things when you were young?

RW: Yes. Every Black production that came, my mother would take us.

JW: Did they put on Black plays at the Center?

RW: Children. A children's group would. I don't recall any adult plays.

JW: What else went on there? Were there forums?

RW: Oh yes. Later on I joined a club, which I still belong to. We're going to be fifty years old next year.

JW: And that was the...

RW: That's the Carpe Diem Club.

JW: Right. How was that formed?

RW: That was formed by a Mrs. Ethel Riley Clark who was then Director of the Booker T. Washington Community Center. And a young woman, -- her name then was Melfaun Pinkney. They were the two that started a club for young women to do social and... work in the community.

JW: What kinds of work were you doing?



RW: Of work in the community? Now, you had to be eighteen years old to join. I was unable to join because I wasn't eighteen. But my friends were older, and my heart was broken. So I had to wait until I was eighteen to join, which was I think about three years later.

JW: But what kinds of work were they doing?

RW: What they were doing then? We had an open forum once a month. It was excellent. We accumulated books. We had a Black library there at the Center; we maintained that. Right after the World War -- the beginning of the Second World War -- we rang doorbells in the Fillmore area asking people to come out on a Sunday afternoon to learn how to vote -- to use the machine. We had voting instructions there... there was a voting machine there. We were able to get that. The Center then had moved from Divisadero Street up to the Japanese School which is on Bush Street between Webster and Buchanan, I guess. The Booker T. Washington Center moved in there, in the large building, while the Japanese were away.

JW: Did you have guest speakers at these forums?

RW: Oh yes.

JW: Do you remember any of them?

RW: Yes. We would have different prominent Black people in the area. One person in particular who stands out in my mind: we were able to secure a Dr. Pine who had been a prisoner in a Japanese camp. He was one of the first exchanged war prisoners. He was able to tell us quite a bit. That wasn't too much on "Black", but you know a lot of Black people were caught over in the Philippines.

JW: "Caught" over there? What do you mean?

RW: When the Japanese declared war on the United States.

JW: What were they doing over there?

RW: They were magicians, they were working over there.

JW: Magicians?

RW: Musicians.

JW: I see... who had stayed over there, I guess, after the Spanish-American War and who had more or less become Filipinos?

RW: Not necessarily. But there were a number of Black people over there.



JW: In this social group, Carpe Diem... Were there other social agencies in the community? Why was this group necessary?

RW: We were the first young group of women to do this, and it was our idea, and so it was necessary.

JW: Was there a feeling that there was suffering in the Black community that needed to be alleviated? Did people feel any sense of oppression or deprivation?

RW: Maybe so, but I was totally unaware of it. It wasn't spoken too much of in our circle. I don't believe it was.

JW: How did people react to stories about lynchings and other atrocities?

RW: Oh, it was just horrible, and we didn't want to hear about it. My mother would buy the Chicago Defender. And, oh, I couldn't believe some of the stories!... It was so remote. But my dad would tell a story about his father and the sheriff.

JW: What was that story?

RW: Sitting on the jail steps and saving a man's life that was to be lynched.

JW: In Ohio?

RW: In Ohio, yes.

JW: So in some ways you felt that the experience of Blacks in the South was somewhat foreign to the California experience?

RW: Definitely. There was segregation here, there was segregation here. But I knew nothing of it. Because my parents didn't take me any place where I would become aware of it.

JW: Where would those places be?

RW: Here in town? I don't know. We didn't go to the hotels. There was a club here called the Cosmos Club, and the Mutual Club, and they were social clubs. They would have dancing parties, and they would go to the hotels, rent the hotels. I remember my mother saying one time what a disgrace it was because they [the owners or managers] said to use the side entrance.

JW: Even the Cosmos Club had to go in the side.

RW: One time only I believe. I can just barely remember that.

JW: But the beaches and anything in Golden Gate Park -- all that was open to





JW: anyone?

RW: Yes. It was open. If there was segregation or there was trouble, I knew nothing about it. I knew nothing about it.

JW: And this was because you think your parents consciously tried to shield you from it?

RW: I think more or less. Then too, my father, he'd walk in anywhere. When we went to... driving east, in Reno, Nevada, -- which was segregated, horribly segregated -- we knew that... My father said, "We will have dinner now." And my mother said, "You know that they're not going to serve us!" My Dad said, "Well, we'll wait and see." And I think the largest club there, my dad opened the door and ushered us in and sat us down. And we were served. People came and looked in the door at us. And they served us, and we walked out.

JW: When you were a teenage girl, did you feel that it was in any way a disadvantage to be a woman?

RW: No. I never even gave that a thought. I don't even think that now.

JW: You don't think it's a disadvantage to be a woman?

RW: No.

JW: What do you think of this whole discussion of women's liberation?

RW: Well, I think there should be equal rights in employment, and there should be equal rights. I still prefer a man to open the door for me. I still like courtesy. I still can't get over it when I get on a bus, when a child is sitting there [without offering to get up], and some real decrepit old lady gets on. Because me, with my gray hair, I get up and give them a seat.

JW: But you don't feel that women in some way have been railroaded into the lowest, cheapest [paid] occupations and discouraged from achieving certain things?

RW: Well, I know that on my job women couldn't go anywhere too far. There was discrimination as far as being a woman was concerned, yes.

JW: But you don't feel a sense of being an inferior being as a woman?

RW: No, I don't at all. I feel and always have felt, and was taught, you're as good as anyone else. "Black" didn't even enter into it.

JW: And neither did being a woman?



RW: No. None whatsoever.

JW: How did women in those days get their sex education?

RW: Whispering. (Laughs) Whispering. Hiding books. I'm sure, knowing my mother, and I'm sure my sister -- because my sister hid nothing -- I'm sure that my sister would discuss it with my mother. But my mother never discussed sex with me. But, knowing my sister, [she] would hide nothing at all -- in fact the kids would say, "Don't tell Luella, because she'll go home and tell her mother." And Luella would. She'd tell Momma everything. But mine came through whispering, and just finding out, that's all.

JW: Was it a concern of people? Did people feel constrained when they were teenagers? Did you feel constrained? Were your parents concerned about your contacts with boys... what might happen?

RW: Well, you see, being isolated where I lived and not coming in contact, I had to travel for my entertainment. I had to leave my community. When I left my community in the evening, my mother usually took me and stayed. When we went to the Community Center, Mother was there. And my father would come and get us. So there was no worry. But my sister and her girlfriends would pay me to go to the show on Sunday. And they would go across the Bay to parties on Sunday or to the park on Sunday. Then I would tell them what the movie was about. (Laughs) And that's how my sister met her husband.

JW: On one of her Saturday escapades.

RW: On one of her Sunday escapades or something like that.

JW: There was never any question that you might go out with White boys?

RW: No. It wasn't at all. The first boy that kissed me was a White boy. It was at graduation -- it was after I graduated from the eighth grade. All the kids said, "What are we going to do that night?" So all the kids used to come to my house, so I said, "Well, come to my house." Then Mother started getting phone calls saying, "Well, Mrs. Scott, Dolores is coming." And my mother said, "Who's coming here?" "Well, some of the kids." So then Mother had to call the neighbor and get sandwiches and punch and everything. But that was my "first kiss". What was I? -- fourteen or thirteen or something? -- I don't know. But no. It wasn't even thought of. I didn't think of boys.

JW: When did you first become interested in boys?

RW: When I first became aware of them, I guess, and looked at them. I was around seventeen years old, thinking they were nice. Seventeen or eighteen -- late,



- RW: late. Because my sister married and she lived in Oakland. My girlfriends that I associated with across town were older. They had boyfriends and they were going out at seventeen and what not. I was over there alone by myself. My mother kept me busy.
- JW: Did she ever throw it up in your face that your sister had married early and therefore don't make that same mistake?
- RW: That's right, that's right. She said, "She'll never get a chance to do what the other one did."
- JW: Did you keep a diary?
- RW: Oh, as a child, yes. Indeed.
- JW: Do you still have it?
- RW: No, no, no.
- JW: When did you stop keeping it?
- RW: Oh, the diary was in early high school.
- JW: Would you write down every thing?
- RW: No, no, no. I had a sister that would delve into it. (Laughs.) Of course, you had a lock and key. But where were you going to keep the lock and key?
- JW: At what point did you meet your husband?
- RW: I was just about eighteen -- my first husband -- I was about eighteen or nineteen.
- JW: And under what circumstances did you meet him?
- RW: One of my girlfriends was madly in love with him.
- JW: And she introduced the two of you?
- RW: Un-huh.
- JW: What a mistake! (Laughter.)
- RW: Oh, but I didn't marry him for a number of years later. I knew him a long time. I married the Fourth of July and I was home for Christmas.



JW: Oh, the marriage didn't last very long.

RW: No.

JW: Well, what attracted you to him? What was his name?

RW: His name was Emory Haller.

JW: And can you tell me something about him?

RW: Should I? Well, he was from Texas and came from a lovely family. But he was a person who did not like to work. He had to prove himself to my father before my father would let me marry him. A whole year he saved, and gave his money to my sister -- she was the banker. So then my father said, "All right". My dad first said that he wasn't coming to the wedding. But he gave me a beautiful wedding.

JW: Where was that?

RW: When?

JW: Where.

RW: I was married at the Booker T. Washington Community Center. I was the youngest Board member they had on the Board. And they had just fixed their upstairs room. Oh, it was beautiful, carpeted and whatnot. And I said, "Well, why can't I get married there?" Everybody thought it was a lovely idea. So it was not a large wedding -- around a hundred guests -- and the reception was held there. It was nice. I only had one attendant, my sister. And I had two juniors, two little girls.

JW: But you still haven't really told me what it was that attracted you to Mr. Haller.

RW: Oh, he was debonair -- handsome man, handsome man.

JW: And you knew him for several... How many years?

RW: Oh, I knew him... I didn't marry him until I was twenty-three, twenty-four years old. So I met him when I was nineteen. He moved to Los Angeles and stayed there for a while, and then he came back. He thought we should get married, and I thought he loved me a great deal.

JW: Were you dating other people at this time?

RW: Oh, yes. I dated.

JW: Who initiated the separation?





- RW: He told me I was a spoiled girl and go home! (Laughs.) And I was happy to go home.
- JW: Where were you living when you got married?
- RW: Oh, we lived on Golden Gate... Golden Gate, I guess it was between about... it was down kind of far. It was maybe about three or four blocks from Fillmore. Everyone said, "Where did you find that place?" But I had a young friend, one of my friends who lived in Sacramento, who was a nurse. When she was here studying to be a nurse at U.C. [the University of California], she and her brother had the unit, and I knew about it. Then when she went to Oakland to work and get married, and her brother went back to Sacramento, the apartment was empty. So we were going to get married and I was able to secure it.
- JW: At what point did you leave home? There's a gap between high school and your first marriage.
- RW: I didn't leave home. I never left home until I married.
- JW: Was that in any way a motivation to get married?
- RW: No. No indeed not. No. Because as soon as I separated, I went home. And I always lived at home until I remarried in 1950. I never thought of leaving home. Home was good!
- JW: Well, twenty-three or twenty-four was rather late for a woman in those days, right?
- RW: Yes.
- JW: Did you feel under any kind of social pressure to get married?
- RW: No. None whatsoever. No. I didn't have any hang-ups. I don't have any now. I never have had any.
- JW: But other people have them. And sometimes they try to impose them on you.
- RW: But I don't have any. Never.
- JW: When you did get married and move out, did your parents.. Was that a trauma for them -- losing their youngest daughter even if it was only to Golden Gate [Avenue].
- RW: I don't think it was a trauma. I don't think that they were "happy" about the marriage and who I married. I know my dad wasn't. Mother never said too much. But as long as I was happy, they were happy.



JW: So you maintained very close touch with your parents even though you were...

RW: Yes. This is why he told me to go home. Because the first thing [I did] in the morning when I woke up, I called my home.

JW: Did you go to college?

RW: No. But the school that I went to had two years of college in it-- junior college.

JW: So what did you do after Lux?

RW: After Lux I stayed home and lived the life.

JW: You didn't have to work?

RW: No.

JW: Didn't your parents encourage you to get out and work?

RW: No. No.

JW: So you assumed that they were going to take care of you forever?

RW: I didn't even give it a thought. I knew that I should work, but they told me to forget about it till something comes along. I worked a little. Yes, now that's wrong. I worked as a stock girl in a store, in Joseph Magnin's. And that was all right. Whenever they would need someone, I would work there -- extra. That was all the employment that I had.

JW: But you never thought in terms of getting a career? Starting out into something like...

RW: Never. Never gave it a thought.

JW: How did you meet your second husband?

RW: Well, let me see. I met him in a beauty shop.

JW: That's an unusual place.

RW: No, he was an operator.

JW: Oh. Here in San Francisco?

RW: Yes.

JW: And what happened from there?



RW: Well, a number of things happened: All the girls thought he was wonderful. And I thought he was pretty nice too. So we met socially, and... he asked me for a date to go to a football game. I said, "Call me sometime." And I think it was about a year and a half later, [when] I saw him. He asked me for a dance, and he asked me how I was and all that. I said to him, "Oh, yes, we were going to a football game, weren't we?" Laughed, we cracked up! And I wouldn't give him another date. So then I took the day off from work. I was working then and had to... was on my job. And I was on the streetcar and I lived on Geary. I got off the streetcar and someone tooted a horn. He belonged to a club with a majority of people [whom] I knew. And he asked me would I go with him that evening. They were going around -- it was during the holidays -- going around to see the fire-houses that were decorated. Then they were going to wind up at somebody's home for a party.

JW: What club was this, do you remember?

RW: It was the Sunday Sports Club. They met on Sundays. They'd go bicycle riding, they'd go hiking, they'd go over in Marin County oyster hunting, you know, buying oysters. Oh, it was a very happy group.

JW: Was it men and women?

RW: Mixed. Men and women. I was asked to join but I didn't. Never did, because I belonged to Carpe Diem. I belonged to the Native Daughters. However I withdrew from the Native Daughters for the time being, because most of the girls were across the Bay, and they weren't doing anything, and I liked to do things. They didn't even discuss a good book... So then I started dating my husband. -- I didn't accept the date that night -- I had a date. Then he called me and asked me -- he knew the church I went to -- could he take me to church, Fellowship Church. I said, "No, my dad was driving my mother and me, but he could bring us home."

JW: How old were you at this point?

RW: I was -- let me see -- I guess I was about thirty-three or thirty-four.

JW: So you had been separated for several years.

RW: Oh yes. Separated and divorced. I think I stayed married -- let me see -- I maybe was only divorced about three years or two years before I married again. But my first husband didn't want a divorce, because he said it was protection.

JW: It was what?



RW: It was protection.

JW: What did he mean?

RW: He would not be obligated to marry anybody else, and he never wanted to marry again. He said, "Don't get a divorce. Let's stay married."

JW: That's an odd one... So what was your second husband's name?

RW: Lorenzo Watson.

JW: And what was his background? Where was he from?

RW: He was from Texas too.

JW: You have a hankering after Texans.

RW: [Whispers.] Never again. Is that [the recorder] on? Never again. -- He came from a very lovely family, a lovely home. In fact his sister is head of the Holiness Church in Northern California.

JW: In where? California?

RW: Northern California.

JW: Oh, I see. So how did your life change once you got married the second time?

RW: Well, it didn't change that much. We had an apartment in the building that my father owned. When the Japanese were moved out, my father took the one flat and made it into two units. And so we moved in one of the apartments, and we lived there.

JW: What address was this, do you remember?

RW: 1469 Geary. It was a lovely home. It was used as a model should they tear down a house like that for redevelopment. Good home. In fact the bathroom -- after they tore the home down, my sister went to price it because we had other property, to get the same bath fixtures and whatnot. And they were so expensive, we didn't buy them. You see because this was during the War, you must remember. (Or it was after the War?) It was after the War, that's right -- '52 or so.

JW: So did you have a second big wedding?

RW: No, no, no. I married in Las Vegas, Nevada. We took a couple to Reno





- RW: to get married -- we went with them. And we were going to get married in May. So we took them to Reno and it started snowing. So we drove to Las Vegas and got married. Because we had to come home that way. We couldn't come back -- they had closed the road. So I called home and said, "I'm going to get married," and that was it. And it lasted twenty-five years.
- JW: What was it that impressed you about your husband?
- RW: He was charm itself. He was charming. He could do anything -- he does anything at all with his hands. There is nothing that he can't do. Now he took the beauty course with his G.I., you know, under G.I. [Veterans' Bill]. But he was a first-class cook, chef.
- JW: Where did he work?
- RW: Back over at U.C. - California. He worked over there cooking.
- JW: In the cafeteria or something?
- RW: Yes. Over there. And he... before we were married, he had gone back to cooking. The beauty business was too bad. However, I guess it was in '54 we separated, and he moved to Los Angeles, and he kept coming back and forth. It was just before my father had a stroke and died, that we went back together again. And he opened a shop. We opened a beauty shop. He thought he wanted to do that again and we maintained it for about eight years.
- JW: How did your parents feel about this second husband?
- RW: They liked him, they liked him very much -- at least my father did.
- JW: What was his family background again?
- RW: Well, his father lived in Texas. His father was a certified plumber. His mother and father separated when he was quite young.
- JW: What part of Texas is this?
- RW: This was Lockhart, Texas. Lockhart. That's about twenty miles outside of Austin. His aunt raised him. His mother's sister raised him. He was a child torn between relatives. In summer his grandmother was waiting for him -- his father's mother, was waiting for him to go to spend the summer in the country. Every Sunday he had to spend with his father and his step-mother. His childhood was, this one wanted him, that one wanted him. He was an only child and he was loved a great deal.
- JW: Was there any feeling....?



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RW: My dad believed in reincarnation. He studied the mysteries of the Far East. He went to a Science of Mind Temple. He went to all their lectures. There used to be a man -- Manley P. Hall -- developed seven senses, you know, instead of the six. And Dad attended all of those. When he was very ill in the hospital, he would have me read that literature. I didn't know what I was reading -- I didn't at all. And he'd say to me, "You're not reading it intelligently." Then he would try to explain it to me. Then I would do a little better. But, you know, in India and those Himalayas and whatnot, if I remember correctly, there is not death. People transform into a different life. A person can be dead so many years and whatnot, and then you travel, and maybe in those mountains you run across that same person. My dad firmly believed in that. So to me, when my dad died, he wasn't dead. Because he didn't believe in it. He was off travelling. And I think of my dad -- well, he liked to travel anyway and he was always going places. I always think of him as being away.

JW: That's a nice way to think.

RW: And I think you would be happier. [Refers to comments made by interviewer (before taping) about recent anniversary of his father's sudden death]

JW: You said that his obituary was written up in the Sun-Reporter?

RW: Yes.

JW: What year was that again?

RW: In 1955.

JW: When was that, so I can look the date up.

RW: July. He died July the 5th. But I think it [the obituary] was probably a week later. I have it all downstairs in his Memorial Book.

JW: Is that something that you put together?

RW: No. Just the cards and the clippings and whatnot.

JW: I'd like to see that some time.

RW: All right. I'll get that out.

JW: Did you keep the dolls that you said you collected as a girl?

RW: I have two, I think, right now. I think one is in the closet.



JW: What happened to the rest of them?

RW: Oh, my mother disposed of them and gave them to different ones... when I didn't object.

JW: Last time we left off we were discussing Mr. Lorenzo Watson and I wanted to return to that briefly. You were married for twenty-five years?

RW: Yes. And you asked me a question, "What attracted me to him?"

JW: Right.

RW: May I tell you one thing, after thinking it over: I fell in love with him.

JW: That's a good reason.

RW: I fell in love with him.

JW: How did you know you were in love and it just wasn't infatuation?

RW: I don't know. What is "love"? I couldn't define it for you. No one can.

JW: Did you find yourself thinking about him all the time and wishing he was around?

RW: Yes. I enjoyed him and we had lots of fun together -- lots of fun together.

JW: You were married for twenty-five years. Is he still living?

RW: Oh yes. He has remarried.

JW: Oh. During the early part of your marriage, how were decisions made? Was he... wear the pants in the house, or did you confer about things?

RW: It was mutual agreement usually. Usually mutual agreement. We discussed things.

JW: About like where to move, how to invest your money, that kind of thing? How to get along with various people in the neighborhood?

RW: We wanted children very badly. And soon as I could, I became pregnant. And it was disastrous. In fact I tried five times. I had one premature little girl. To be my size... to have in my eighth month a baby that weighed less than two pounds was heartbreak. She lived two days, two short days. We discussed children, and how we would raise them, I think more than anything. And I always said that any child of mine would have to be brought up in a Catholic or parochial school here in San Francisco.



JW: Why was that?

RW: I had a good public school education, but I think it has deteriorated. Especially the neighborhood pattern, and this was before busing. This area where we were living at the time, I couldn't see a child going to the school in the neighborhood.

JW: Did the doctors ever determine why you were losing so many children?

RW: Yes. I was born with a defect and I couldn't hold them.

JW: Did you consider adoption?

RW: Yes, we did. We tried adoption. In fact, the woman that called me said that my husband was the only man that ever called to make an appointment for an adoption in all the years that she had worked in the agency. Ironically, it was on account of him that they turned us down for adoption.

JW: What could it [their reason] possibly have been?

RW: My husband had suffered, when he was in the Service Armed Forces, a nervous breakdown. They thought <sup>they</sup> wasn't stable enough. Then after, just before we put in for adoption, he had two heart attacks. And they wouldn't give us a child. My doctor said it was the cruelest thing he ever heard of.

JW: Yes, that's what I think.

RW: Oh, and then five years later or four years later, they called and asked us, would we consider adopting. But then I was in my forties, and you don't think too much about raising a child when you're in your forties. I think a child should have a younger parent.

JW: Why did he suffer this nervous breakdown?

RW: The pressures. I think it was the pressure.

JW: What branch of the Service was he in?

RW: I don't even know. It was before I married him and I never questioned him. He was reluctant to talk about it, and so I didn't talk about it.

JW: This was the Second or the Korean War?

RW: This was the Second World War.

JW: And he was overseas when it happened, or do you know?





RW: No, he was in the States. He was in the States.

JW: Did you consider yourself... in other words, in your relationship... were you "liberated", in the current sense of the term that you felt free to do whatever you wanted to do... you didn't have to kowtow to him?

RW: I didn't ever think of those things. I never thought of that. We had disagreements when we first were married because I was used to going into town on Saturday. It was my day off and I liked to go shopping. And he just couldn't understand it. He just couldn't understand why anyone wanted to go shopping on Saturdays. And I said, "Because I like to." He would find other things for us to do. So that stopped me from going shopping.

JW: Did other people in your circle consider you an especially well-matched couple?

RW: I really don't know. Some people... I think there was more talk behind my back than they told me. You find these things out way down the line. -- But, my husband was a playboy.

JW: Oh.

RW: Does that answer the question?

JW: I hope none of your friends were involved in his 'games'.

RW: Oh, I'm afraid they were.

JW: But still the marriage lasted an awful long time.

RW: Yes, it did.

JW: Up until three years ago?

RW: Six years ago.

JW: But you were still in love with him, I suppose?

RW: When we separated, I was terribly hurt. I was terribly hurt. But there were several reasons why we did separate. He had been going with this woman a number of years, and the wife is always... I knew he had someone. And I'm very frank about it. I told him that I had enough money to hire a detective and find out who it was. But it just wasn't worth it. It just wasn't worth it. So consequently I didn't seek it. If I found out, okay. Well, really and truly, the big break came about property and about names on property. When you're involved with another person, with my sister and whatnot -- well, it just was



RW: a big family disagreement. It wasn't very pleasant.

JW: Was the divorce itself, the legal procedure, difficult for you?

RW: I have a friend who is a legal secretary. When my husband said he wanted a divorce, I called her. She said we will do it, and all it will cost him is just to file the papers and whatnot. So then I told him, and so... First I was going to let him get the divorce. Then I said, "Oh, no." Then I sued him, you know, filed for divorce. I happened to get this judge here in town that had been censured. He was very angry and had just lost his election. And he didn't approve of people doing their own divorces. He gave me a rough time in his chambers. But he, nevertheless, gave me the divorce.

JW: If you had to do the first... If you had to live your life over again, what would you change?

RW: If I had my life to live over again, I'd probably think a little differently. My thinking would be different. For instance, I had every opportunity in the world to do something and I didn't. I could have gone to college. Anything I wanted I think my family would have strived to give me. And perhaps maybe in that direction. Otherwise... my marriages, I'd probably make the same mistakes. If you care for someone, you just care for them.

JW: Do you think that you would have perhaps wanted to try living away from San Francisco at any point?

RW: No. I didn't like too many cities. I liked Cleveland the first time I was there. I thought Cleveland was a nice place to live.

JW: Was this when you went on your way to New York that time?

RW: Yes. I was there, I think, three times. I've been to Cleveland three times. The first time I was there, I thought Cleveland was a nice city. But of course, that was in '31.

JW: Right. But in terms of... I was thinking in terms of living away to be more able to live on your own.

RW: I had no desire to. I had no desire. I had a very deep attachment to my mother and my dad. And, frankly, when I was young, I would go out with then on Sunday night to dinner and go to a nightclub with them in preference to going out with a date.

JW: Did people comment about this? Did they consider that unusual?



- RW: Oh, they knew us, and my mother and father. The four of us, we would go places together and we had a good time. This was before the [Second] War. Way before the War they had a club here, and they served delicious dinners. On Sundays my dad would make a reservation... They had a small, we call them "combos" now, then it was an "orchestra". And I would make a date after I'd go to dinner with my mother and dad, because I didn't want to miss that.
- JW: What was this club called?
- RW: It was called "Jack's" on Sutter Street.
- JW: Right. I've heard of Jack's... We did talk about your mother's interest in the theater. Did you ever personally meet anyone that's considered a celebrity?
- RW: As a child? No. I can't recall doing that. Maybe later on but no, I can't remember anyone.
- JW: She didn't drag you backstage and say you've got to get an autograph?
- RW: Oh no. No, no. She wasn't that forward a person.
- JW: There's a lot of comment these days about police and their dealings with the community. What was the general feeling about police in the Twenties and Thirties?
- RW: Well, I can recall an incident: Family friends... their son was walking home late one night in the Mission, and he was brutally treated at the time.
- JW: For what?
- RW: For walking the streets. And because, I guess, he was Black. That's the only reason why, because he wasn't doing anything. He was the type of person that wasn't doing anything [wouldn't do a crime]. Came from a wonderful family -- a wonderful mother, step-father, aunt and uncle. You know, he was surrounded with a great deal of love and whatnot. That's the only thing that I recall about police treatment. Oh, yes, and I will say this: one of my friends, when we were going to Sunday School teachers' meeting, and she walked on Sutter Street, across Sutter Street to go to Zion Church. (That was on the corner along Geary, near Webster.) The police stopped her, a young girl on the way to Sunday school meeting. Uncalled for... Different incidents.
- JW: They stopped her and did what?
- RW: Questioned her, thinking that perhaps maybe she was a street woman or something like that. Particularly in that vicinity.



JW: What did this boy's parents do about this?

RW: Oh, there was a protest and whatnot. And apologies from the police.

JW: But there was no compensation?

RW: No, no. His name was Bobby Brown. He was an amateur baseball player. Played, you know, in the City leagues and whatnot. Very well liked.

JW: Was it assumed that the police department was generally corrupt? Did people consider them protectors of law and order, or how did they really look at it?

RW: My dad and my mother never commented too much about it. My first dealing with realizing the police were corrupt was, I guess, when I read Vincent Hallinan's book. I think that was published perhaps in... maybe the Forties or Fifties. I realized that San Francisco police were corrupt.

JW: But you didn't have any personal experience with it.

RW: No. Our backyard touched a policeman's. And he would make all the children in the neighborhood behave. He was an Irish policeman -- great big Irish man. And we all... Mr. Waller was a policeman. My sister had no fear of him whatsoever. The rest of the kids in the neighborhood did, but Luella didn't. She didn't have any fear [of much of anything].

JW: Did you have any contact with... Were there Black people involved in any underworld activities?

RW: What do you mean "underworld"?

JW: People who made a living off of criminal activity. Speakeasies or prostitution, gambling, numbers running, anything like that. Drugs.

RW: Oh, I used to make cakes and cookies.

JW: Is this a confession?

RW: No. I used to make cakes and cookies. And they told me about some girls wanting some cakes and cookies. And it was a house of prostitution. I'd go to the front door and they'd order cakes from me. I guess this was in the Thirties. This was in the Thirties and I wasn't working. I'd buy the ingredients, or my mother bought the ingredients, and I'd make these cakes and I sold them. I always made good cookies. And everybody used to say, "Make cookies and we'll buy them." So for a while, just doing it at home, that's what I was doing. I forgot about that.

JW: But you didn't have any real... You didn't know these people socially?





- RW: Well, I guess sometimes at dances they were there. San Francisco was so small -- the Black community. And if you went to a dance, they were there -- if you went to a public dance, and I used to go to public dances. And all the nice people were there [too].
- JW: Were these women... Was their clientele primarily Black or White? Do you know?
- RW: I wouldn't know.
- JW: You didn't notice who happened to hang around these places?
- RW: Well, I wasn't there. I would just go and deliver the cake and leave the area. I lived in the Mission then, and this was over here in the Fillmore.
- JW: What about drugs? Were there people on cocaine or anything like that in those days?
- RW: I really don't know. I never heard of it.
- JW: You didn't feel any threat from it?
- RW: Oh no, no.
- JW: The community didn't discuss it?
- RW: No.
- JW: Moving to the other end of the social scale, what about... We talked about this off-record last time. We didn't talk about it much on record: Who were the social leaders in the community?
- RW: The social leaders in the community. Well, there was a group of ladies here -- Mrs. Laura Davis, Mrs. Clark, I can't even think of her name, her first name...
- JW: Lecount?
- RW: No. She had boys. George and Jack Clark, and two girls, let's see... a set of twins way down the way. Mrs. Clark, and let me see who else, the others... They had several clubs here. And they were supposed to be the leaders of "society" -- the Mutual Club, the Cosmos Club. Those were supposed to be "society" people.
- JW: Why do you say supposed to be? Weren't they?
- RW: Well, on what basis did they decide they were "society"?



- JW: Well, they just were considered Negro society. In the South, I discovered and found out, that to get social standing was one way to be a teacher or to be in the professions. Here in California, in San Francisco where I was raised, we had two -- one doctor and one dentist. Both of the men were unmarried. That was our profession[a]s. Everyone else worked for a living. A woman said to my mother one day -- and it was hilarious, it was a big joke: "If my husband made the money that Harvey Scott made, I would lead San Francisco society." And my mother said, "Oh, you would?" And she [the woman] said it was too bad -- and she called his name -- that he [apparently one of the unmarried professionals] isn't... And she said, "Because me, you know, I don't care anything about social position." That was the temper of our home. It didn't make any difference who you were... I mean if we liked you, and you were our friend, it didn't make any difference what you were doing for a living. -- You were our friend. You were accepted in our home.
- JW: Did complexion have anything to do with who was "in" and who was "out"?
- RW: No, no. I would say no.
- JW: You didn't discern any difference in the treatment between yourself and your sister?
- RW: Oh no. Not like I heard [happened] in Washington, [D.C.]. . Now my aunt came from Washington with my cousin. And that was what the family estrangement was about. My mother was brown-skinned; my sister was fair; and she didn't think it was fair for my father to be saddled with a brown-skinned wife, and she told my mother.
- JW: "To be saddled with"?
- RW: Yes.
- JW: What did she mean by that?
- RW: Well, to have a brown-skinned wife. My sister and Dad could "pass", you see, maybe for Portuguese, anything. Mother was brown.
- JW: She was suggesting that he just divorce her?
- RW: She suggested to my mother to go home. And she would raise Luella, and Luella would have more opportunity.
- JW: In the Black community. She meant she was going to take her back to one of the Eastern cities or something and marry her off to a professional?



RW: No, she was going to stay right here in San Francisco.

JW: But she didn't know that it [complexion or "color consciousness"] didn't matter here... that that was not an issue?

RW: I don't think she realized at the time. I don't think she did. No. Color to me -- I think you're talking to the wrong person when you talk about color because I never paid any attention to it. And I never paid any attention whether you were a doctor or a lawyer or a teacher or anything. It didn't make any difference to me. In fact, after the Second World War and the influx of Blacks came in, it was a long time before I realized that all these Black professionals were here and [that] they had their own group of people that they associated with. A distant cousin moved here with her husband. I was invited to their home to a party. I went... I was a stranger, and I did not stay too long. I called up for someone to come and get me and they did. I made my excuse and said I had somewhere else to go -- because I was miserable. I didn't know those people. I hadn't been to a Black college. I hadn't been to Fisk, Meharry and all those others... Then it took me a few years longer when I was married... I didn't even realize we had Hunter's Point. I was unaware of it, and that Black community out there. I have some friends, and I don't think they're aware of it yet. Really and truly.

JW: So there was, in a sense, another in-crowd that moved in on the in-crowd.

RW: That's right.

JW: And these people had degrees from Southern universities and probably had their own hierarchy.

RW: Oh, definitely. They still do. They still do. Now take the Links organization.

JW: That's a women's club.

RW: That's a women's club throughout the United States. From what I understand, the Links, when it first was organized, was supposed to be a group of women in different walks, different job categories, professions and whatnot, all joining together exchanging viewpoints. But what is the Links now? The Links has become Doctor So-and-So's wife and Attorney So-and-So's wife. That's what the Links is now. At least here in the Bay Area it is. If you are compatible with the group, and you have enough money, then you're in. Yet I have friends who could buy and sell many a doctor's wife and attorney's wife too. But they've never been asked to join.

JW: So what is the relationship between the native daughters, let's say, and the immigrant daughters?



- RW: Sometimes their paths cross. If you play bridge, your paths cross. If you have something in common. If you play golf, tennis or what have you.
- JW: What do you think the total impact of this immigration was on the Black society that was here originally?
- RW: The Black society here took a back seat. They had their own little social gatherings, and the professionals had theirs. The fraternities and sororities had theirs. Some of the people, of course, you know, -- I have friends that went to college. And they belonged to sororities. Most of them, you know, it just passed [unintelligible]. But, of course, when this large influx of Negroes came out here, then they became more active. And, of course, I had friends that worked very hard in the alumni associations and that sort of thing.
- JW: Do you think that the general impact of this immigration was positive? Do you think things improved as a result of this 40,000 or so people coming in?
- RW: In San Francisco? Oh, I think so, why, yes. I think it has opened the way to many things. Whether they opened the way, or whether it was Martin Luther King -- that beautiful man and his march on Alabama which opened up everything... But, as I say, I didn't know too much about segregation because we didn't think of going to the hotels. We didn't think of going to places that we knew we weren't being welcomed. But finances, money kept us out. The people didn't have that kind of money to go to the finer places. I went to this private school. When we graduated the dean took us to the Mark Hopkins Hotel for tea. I walked in. The people stopped and stared.
- JW: What age were you then?
- RW: Eighteen, seventeen going on eighteen.
- JW: But they didn't stop you from doing whatever?
- RW: Oh, no. Oh no, no, no. But I was the focus of their attention.
- JW: Was it curiosity? Or were they trying to make you feel ashamed?
- RW: It was curiosity: What was I doing there? How did this happen? But nowadays, here in San Francisco, the young people that I know -- my friends' children, their grandchildren -- they don't have the social life that we had. They don't have the fun that we had. We had the Community Center. We had dances. On Friday night we were there. We knew each other. Like you interviewed Willie Brooks. Florence Allen was there. Carlos McLean was there. The Clark boys were there. All our friends were there. We had dances. We had a good time. There was no dope. If the boys had a





RW: bottle, we didn't know anything about it -- the girls didn't know anything about it. We had just good clean fun.

JW: That's what Mr. Brooks said.

RW: That's right. And now these kids, they don't have that. They don't know what it is to go and know everybody in the room and laugh and talk. And just have a good time. I feel sorry for the young people that are coming up.

JW: Do you feel... Some people feel a little constricted by a small town atmosphere. They don't like everybody to know everybody. They feel that they can get ostracized that way or that they, you know, sometimes they get bored with the same circle of friends. Were there any people like that in your group -- who wanted to get out, who wanted to break away? You said your mother was raised in a small town and she wanted to get out.

RW: Oh yes. But she had a religious background. [See page 3.]

END TAPE 3:3:1

BEGIN TAPE 3:3:2

RW: [Preceded by description of father's childhood experience of local ministers coming over for dinner and eating practically everything that had been prepared leaving almost nothing for the host family.]

... because they made it up and decided that they would never have a minister for dinner. (Laughter.) In our home. And we never did until I married. My husband's cousin, who he was raised with -- her husband was a minister -- and he came to our home for dinner. But that's the only time a minister was in our home, which was quite often, that they didn't get good things to eat. Everything was saved for the minister. And I guess it was that bad in mother's home, but my mother just... she rebelled. She rebelled plenty.

JW: Do you think the overall... Do you think that the churches and the ministers, as a group, or as an institution, contribute something positive to the Black community? Or do they really make a difference one way or the other?

RW: I think that a lot of people follow their minister. I think that they wield a great deal of influence on their membership.

JW: Do you think the influence is positive?

RW: Sometimes. Sometimes.

JW: What about the tendency of a lot -- especially the more Fundamentalist churches -- to emphasize life after death rather than life here? Do you



JW: think that helps Black people survive, or just helps them be content?

RW: Well, haven't they had that since the beginning of slavery? Isn't that all they've had to live for, in those days... and it's been carried down. Nothing bores me more than to go to a church and hear the minister say, "When I was a little boy... " or this that and the other. That bores me. Tell me how to live today!

JW: So what do you think their impact is in teaching these kinds of ideas?

RW: Well, don't you think the younger people are getting away from it?

JW: I don't know what's happening here among young people.

RW: I don't know either because I don't go to a Black church.

JW: You still attend Fellowship Church?

RW: Nope.

JW: You don't go to church at all?

RW: Oh, yes I do.

JW: I mean for religious reasons.

RW: I go to a Catholic church.

JW: Oh. Which one?

RW: I'm supposed to go up here to St. Agnes' but I wind up on Steiner Street at St. Dominic's.

JW: And that's a predominantly White church?

RW: No. I go quite often down in Chinatown to Old St. Mary's. They have a beautiful choir, beautiful choir. And I like the Jesuit Fathers. They're teaching fathers you know.

JW: Wasn't there a Black church here by the name of St. Benedict the Moor?

RW: Yes. I never did go, but maybe a couple of times.

JW: What was that like?

RW: It was just a small mission church. But a glorious day happened in San Francisco, a glorious day: A young man that was raised as a Catholic, and I guess he was



RW: baptized Catholic, a young man named Gopaul... (I can't even think of his first name, -- Helen and Kline Wilson will be able to tell you his name, I believe)... He went to school here; he graduated from Mission High School; he went to a seminary and he became our first colored or first Black priest. And he was ordained here in San Francisco at St. Mary's on Van Ness Avenue. St. Mary's Church was then on Van Ness Avenue. It was later destroyed by fire. I decided to go that day to church with one of my friends. We walked from my home down to Van Ness Avenue. I couldn't believe what I was witnessing! Traffic cops were controlling the traffic... St. Mary's was a church that was built high and you had to go up a great number of stairs to get inside -- a large cathedral. People were coming in all directions. I mean droves of people. Just before I went in the entrance I saw a family friend. And she was standing there crying. And she was saying how she had wished his mother had lived for that day. She'd only been dead less than a year. The church was packed for his -- well, for him -- he was reciting his first mass. He was giving his first mass. St. Benedict the Moor was too small for him. So they had to use St. Mary's Cathedral. And it was a magnificent day. I didn't attend the dinner that night, which I regret. For a number of years I heard from Father Gopaul. Then recently... one of my dearest and closest friends is a Catholic nun, and she's principal of a high school in Compton, California. For a while Father Gopaul was down there in the school system, the parochial school system.

JW: Why are you still in attendance in church? What does it give you? What do you get out of it?

RW: What do I get out of it?

JW: Why do you go? Some people don't find going to church means anything to them.

RW: Well, for my spiritual being. I'm not an avid church-goer. I don't go every Sunday. I'm not a good Catholic. My friend, Sister Helena... we laugh about it. She sends me all kinds of literature and whatnot and says, "One day you will become a good one." I have my doubts on it. But she has hopes. But I have to go. I'm compelled to go. There's something inside of me that makes me go.

JW: What is a "good Catholic"? What makes you not a "good Catholic"?

RW: Well, first thing, I don't go to Confession. I don't confess my sins. I just don't go all the time. A Holy Day of Obligation you might find me at home. A "good Catholic" goes.

JW: I see. We talked a little bit about Carpe Diem. But we didn't talk very much about Native Daughters, how that came about, how you joined and what they do. I know you say you kind of left them behind after a while.



RW: Well, when I first belonged to them a number of years ago, I guess that was in the Forties I joined. [They] were a group of women. The majority of them, except Florence Allen, they were all older than I was at the time. Not that much older. But they just met socially. And I got tired of crossing the Bay -- because most of the members lived over there -- and I became involved in other things. So I just stopped going. Then, after I separated from my husband in '72 and my time was freer... For a number of years, you see, I didn't do too much on weekends because I had my mother as an invalid. We had someone here through the week to look after her, but Saturdays and Sundays, if I didn't call someone in, then she was my responsibility. I had more time, in fact I was free. And someone said come back in the Native Daughters. And I liked the girls, the women, that were in there, so I went back in it. It's just a social group. They do a couple of charitable things a year.

JW: Do you recruit younger members?

RW: No.

JW: In other words, if a young lady is in her Thirties and was born here, would she be eligible to join? Or would she be inclined to join?

RW: She wouldn't be inclined to join a social group like that, I'm afraid. I wouldn't see any reason why she would. There's nothing there to attract her. I understand there's a younger group of Native Daughters in the Bay Area, but I don't know too much about it. I think it's a Berkeley group. But as far as I know, over here in San Francisco there's no younger Native Daughters group that's been organized.

JW: What about the... I've heard something on a tape [from Oakland Museum's Collection vi 2. "Vivian Osborne Marsh"] about a Sanabar Club, or something like that.

RW: Zanzibar, I think it was. That was an Oakland group of people. And as far as I know, they just had a membership. And once a month or once every couple of months they had dancing parties. I think a member was entitled to one or two bids, and you were considered quite lucky if you received a bid.

JW: An invitation to come?

RW: Yes.

JW: What about a group called "The Mighty Few"? Have you heard of them?

RW: No.





JW: Did you join sororities?

RW: No. I didn't go to college.

JW: I know. You have to have been in college first to join?

RW: Oh, no, they have business sororities. But I'm not a business-woman. I worked for the [Federal] Government.

JW: What other kinds of activities? Was the NAACP or anything like that of interest to you?

RW: I have membership in the NAACP, but I've never attended too much. I guess you could count the times on one hand. But I'm interested in... if they have a good speaker. I go to lectures, I go to symphonies, and go around to different social affairs. But to go hear an argument, no. I don't get involved in that.

JW: Do you remember anything about Marcus Garvey or any of the other separatist movements?

RW: No, I don't. I remember my dad speaking about, "Oh, that's somebody that believes in the Garvey movement," or something like that. Remarks being made. But I don't remember anyone that was involved in it.

JW: Was he in favor of the Garvey movement, or did he speak of it disparagingly?

RW: I can't remember really. I can't remember. But knowing my dad, I don't think he would be in favor of it.

JW: Why is that?

RW: Well, just him. Remember I told you, he'd be a hippie if he was living today.

JW: How did you get on [hired] at the Alameda Naval Air Station?

RW: Well, I went there to Naval Air Station because I was treated so badly after going through Defense School. It was quite accidental how I even wound up in defense work. But a friend read about [that] they needed learners and she went down...

JW: They needed what?

RW: "Learners". "Aircraft learners".

JW: What are those?



RW: To learn aircraft. "Aircraft learners".

JW: Okay.

RW: That was the term they used. People who were interested in learning about aircraft and then going to work in Defense.

JW: This was in the early Forties?

RW: Yes. Very early Forties. So she went down, picked up some papers and gave me a set and I filled them out. We took an examination, which later I found out -- and never heard the term before -- "manual dexterity". Also questions about mechanics. I passed very high on that test. That to me was a big joke because I didn't even drive a car.

I took an examination the next week for a City janitor, mind you. Times were not so good and there was just no employment. Hundreds of people were in that Civic Auditorium. I didn't pass the janitor's test. (I doubt whether I'd have kept it anyway.) But I passed this [the "manual dexterity" exam] and I was sent to Defense School in Palo Alto, California. That's quite a ways from here. It was three months training and we were paid to become a "learner".

From there they asked you when you finished your course, where you would like to go. I chose Hamilton Field, California. That's in San Raphael. I went there. They would not put me to work because I was Black. That was my first dealings because I was Black and couldn't do anything. They let me sit there day after day. And I sat... I'd come home and cry. My family said, "Go back." So one day they called me to the office. The major who was in charge of the division I was put in had some papers. He said, "Sign these, Mrs. Watson." I said, "Sign what?" They had given me a set of papers saying I requested a transfer to go to Sacramento. I said, "I didn't request." He said, "Mrs. Watson, I think you should go there." I said, "I requested to come to Hamilton Field." He said, "You don't like those papers?" He said, "Mrs. Haller" -- my name was Haller at the time. I said, "No, I don't like them." "Well, we'll write you another set." I said, "Start writing."

When I left there I came home, of course, and told my dad. My dad made a phone call to a man that was on the Civil Service Commission. He told my dad to send me down the next day. I went in the office. I stated my case. The girl that interviewed me -- I know now she must have been a Communist. She must have belonged to the Communist Party. Because we didn't have that type of liberal unless they did belong to the Party in the area. Those were my first dealings with this... oh, it was a terrible thing. I was told after I saw someone in the department and whatnot, after she took all my statement, she said, "You want to see such-and-such a man." I went to see him. He said, "Mrs. Watson [Haller], we will clear up Hamilton Field. We will open it for



RW: Negro people... But you must go back there. They haven't let you work. Don't ask for any work. We are going to transfer you. You have to get out of there, because you will be the reason why we're going to open it up."

So I had to go back there and sit down again. They would not give me a thing to do. The shop supervisor, other women that I had gone to school with -- the White women -- were taken out on the line. They were working on aircraft; they were given things to do in the shop. That man [a foreman apparently] let me sit there. I was getting paid for it. Sixty-eight cents an hour or something like that. Because then we were "helpers". So, I understand the major was transferred. After I left there, Black people were able to get in. [Interruption] I went to Hamilton Field until my transfer came through.

I went to work at Alameda Naval Air Station for the Navy, which was closer to home. The first day I went there, they had my transfer papers and whatnot and I went in [to] personnel. The personnel man read over my report and everything, and he looked at me and said, "You have been given a pretty rough time. I think I will take you to the shops myself and introduce you to where you will be working." So he took me to one shop and they were talking it over with me what I had learned in school and whatnot. They thought I would do better in accessories. So then I was sent to the Accessory Division, in engine overhaul. I was interviewed by the supervisor there and he said he would be happy to have me. So the personnel man looked at me and said, "Mrs. Haller, I want you to have the rest of the day off and report back to us tomorrow if you feel as though you want to. Or would you rather start next week?" I said, "I'd rather start next week." So I went there with that cloud of opening up Hamilton Field and this discrimination, and what they had given me, these papers.

So then the next week when I reported to Naval Air Station, Alameda, the head of the whole division (which was a Navy lieutenant)... I was only at work about an hour when he came back to see me and said that if I felt any discrimination, if anything happened at all, please to come and see him and talk it over. I did not have to... For me not to feel that I had to go to the Civil Service Commission about it, but please come to see him. But, of course, he was avoiding trouble. So I went there with that, you know, a reputation of having... coming from Hamilton Field and going to the Civil Service Commission.

So, consequently, everything around me was rasy. I can't say in other shops it was that way. This was really in the heat of the Second World War. Men were leaving to go to war. We would get a few enlisted men, and mostly women were coming in. And having the experience I had, I wound up, of course, head of the shop and whatnot for a while. Temporarily they gave women those jobs. There was discrimination there. The Black men that should have been supervisors didn't become supervisors until maybe in the late Sixties,



- RW: early Seventies -- just a few short years before I left. (And I worked there thirty years.) However, I didn't keep on doing aircraft work. I went into the production control end of it where... doing book work and interesting things. That's why I stayed.
- JW: You enjoyed your work?
- RW: Oh yes. I like people. I was in contact with representatives and management all the time. And so my job was interesting. Never a dull day.
- JW: How did your supervisees react to having a Black woman in charge?
- RW: They had no choice. They were happy to have it, in those days. But, of course, when the War was over, there were no women in charge. In fact, I guess just about two years before, maybe I was on the Committee two years -- two years maybe before I retired -- the woman that was head of the station [news] paper and who served on the Equal Opportunity Committee with me, she came over to see me and said, "Roberta, we have won a point." I said, "What is this?" She said, "The way is going to be open for women. They must treat us as equals." Of course, we were quite jubilant because they wouldn't even consider a woman as supervisor, even my thirty years. We could go as high as we could, you know, but it was always under a man.
- JW: How has retirement affected your life?
- RW: The days aren't long enough and it's beautiful. I will say this, it was a trauma. Because I retired in July and my husband and I separated in October. And here I was without anything to do. I wasn't at work where my desk was a center of all activity, talking to people, being in the midst of quite a program and then coming home and having someone to talk to and whatnot. Then my husband and I separated... it was a little difficult at first. But I managed. I managed.
- JW: So now things are, as people would put it, "cool"?
- RW: Oh, yes. I manage very well.
- JW: I guess we have about ten more minutes. What was your general feeling about this country's involvement in the War? Did you support the war effort and feel that what had been done and the lives that were lost were worth it?
- RW: The Second World War? Well, I am a pacifist. I don't believe in wars. I just don't believe in them and I don't like human life to be destroyed. However, I worked in the war industry. It was very hard to work beside a young man that was getting ready to go overseas -- the enlisted personnel -- and not seeing them come back. I worked as a Gray Lady with the Red Cross during the





- RW: Second World War. This is where they brought all the injured and maimed, to San Francisco, at the different hospitals. Sometimes we were there to entertain them or... Because, you see, I was in my late twenties, early thirties then, and I wasn't a teenager. We would get even younger girls to come and entertain the soldiers that were coming in. But we would supervise. You see, I was a young matron, I guess you would say. And I just didn't like it. I don't like war. And, of course, the Vietnam War... Let's not even discuss it.
- JW: Well, do you think that if you had been a man, you would have tried to take conscientious objector status?
- RW: Oh definitely.
- JW: And gone to jail?
- RW: Oh, yes. I wouldn't have minded. I wouldn't have minded.
- JW: How do you propose that the country... If most people felt the way you do, how do you expect that Nazism would have been stopped?
- RW: Well, of course, you treat violence, I guess, with violence, they say. Everybody doesn't think like me and this is what makes the world go round. Everyone doesn't think like me. So those who want to go to war -- and there are people that like war... I worked with a young man -- he liked war. He enjoyed the army life. There are people... Now you must remember, everyone that came back came to work at Naval Air Station, were mostly all service men over there. One Friday, I couldn't believe my eyes, not one person, but hundreds of persons I watched... witnessed them receive their walking papers. How they kept me I'll never know. But I was there so early in the War. I was one of the fortunate women that they kept.
- JW: How did the women feel about being laid off? Did they feel relieved? Or did they feel they'd been cheated in some way?
- RW: They didn't even have time to voice it. Some of them, it was their livelihood. It was the first time they were making any money. And, of course, a woman that was separated or divorced, they needed it. They needed their jobs. But the day that they let hundreds of people out, just hundreds -- I never witnessed anything like it. Everyone had annual leaves that they had accumulated. As of then they were terminated and had to use their annual leave. They [Naval policy makers] had it all figured out. If they [the temporary employees] had two weeks annual leave, then after that annual leave was up, then their termination. You see, because it was 'war' service. Nothing was permanent 'civil' service. A few [civil servants] were there but very, very few... So I didn't give it a thought if everyone thought



- RW: [as I did] .. because that isn't human nature. Everyone doesn't think alike. And there would be somebody that would be willing to go to war. There were people... even though people were drafted in this last war... there would be somebody to volunteer to go. Somebody would go fight it. But it wouldn't have to be me. Because I couldn't bear to kill anyone.
- JW: Except in self-defense?
- RW: In self defense, I'm sure I would. I'm sure. Because when you're drowning, you clutch at a straw. If a little piece of straw is going by, you reach out for it.
- JW: How do you think that San Francisco has changed in the last fifteen or twenty years?
- RW: Oh my goodness, it's awful. It is terrible. It breaks my heart. San Francisco was always a beautiful city. For instance, it was a pleasure to go, like we say, "downtown". It was a pleasure. You dressed to go downtown. You looked well. A woman wore gloves, a hat. They were groomed. But now when you go downtown, people in curlers, hair curlers. People -- their appearance it's just terrible. And begging. And all those vendors. I can't believe it's San Francisco! The only place that's decent to go and you feel good is up Grant Avenue and Union Square. And then the park is just terrible, Union Square Park. Once it was a delight to go there.
- JW: When do you think this change came about?
- RW: The hippies, more or less.
- JW: The Sixties?
- RW: In the Sixties. Then, of course, I couldn't believe my eyes when I would see all these Black people that I didn't know, that came in here during the Fifties. I couldn't believe it. I still can't believe it. It's hard for me to believe it. I just can't believe it. In fact, the evening I met Mr. [Clarence: Executive director of the San Francisco African-American Historical and Cultural Society] Maloney at Aileen Hernandez' office -- they were having a meeting to talk about purchasing or leasing a building where all Black groups could get together and share office space or have private office space and use the office machines and whatnot. When they were talking about different groups, I could not believe there were that many Black organizations, associations and clubs in San Francisco. No one knows how stunned I was.
- JW: What do you project is going to happen in the next twenty years? Do you think things will move back on course or do you think things are going to get worse? Do you think things racially are going to get better?
- RW: Well, I hope they'll get better and better. But I wouldn't know. I don't think



RW: I'm in-the-know of things that much, Mr. Warr. In this neighborhood, it's turning White again. For a while it was almost half and half, and then it swayed Black. But now it's definitely turning White. White people are moving back. They're repairing, they're doing things to the neighborhood. You see, the Black people didn't buy their homes. So they have to move. Where they're going I don't know. But, for instance, here in the Haight-Ashbury, it is turning White... For a while it was Black.

JW: What do you think the young Black person has to look forward to today?...

..... END TAPE

END OF INTERVIEW











